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**Rezension von UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible  
Cultural Heritage, herausgegeben von M. D. Foster, L. Gilman**

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*UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage* ed. by Michael Dylan Foster and Lisa Gilman (review)

Stefan Groth

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insula recording project of 1938, which netted about a thousand songs, Leary leaves us with the charming vignette of Helene Stratman-Thomas sitting in her car while her assistant recorded bawdy lumberjack songs—another example of the dedication of these collectors.

The northeastern corner of North America has been rich in songs, singers, and collectors. Most of the great singers have passed on, but thanks to the enthusiastic work of two women, many of their songs remain for those who wish to study, enjoy, or sing them. Fannie Hardy Eckstorm collected in Maine and published two collections. Unfortunately, her notes and cylinder recordings are, at the time of publication, lost. Helen Hartness Flanders worked all over New England, but especially in Vermont. Her collection of almost 4,500 songs and fiddle tunes from nearly 500 singers and musicians from all over New England now reside in Middlebury College and in the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress. The essay on her work and that of Fannie Eckstorm was written by her granddaughter, Nancy-Jean Ballard Seigel.

I. Sheldon Posen introduces us to four collectors in eastern Canada: W. Roy Mackenzie, Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf, Maud Karpeles, and Helen Creighton. Each brought different interests and skills to the task. One impressive passage recounts a session in which Creighton sang a stirring ballad about a rescue to a group of men who were involved in the incident, recording their comments and interjections. This example shows that folklorists have come a long, long way from the collecting of antiquarian texts.

The next two essays leave regionalism and deal with three giants of folk song collecting who helped nurture and give direction to the archives of the Library of Congress: John and Alan Lomax and Robert Winslow Gordon. Matthew Barton and Paul J. Stamler deal thoroughly and thoughtfully with these seminal figures.

Next comes Dan Milner's essay on "Collecting Occupational Songs," which contains an overview of those occupations that have been celebrated in song: heavy labor to create our transportation infrastructure, songs about transportation work and workers, songs of the sea, union songs, and prison work songs. Many songs describe labor; others actually facilitate

the job to be done. Outstanding in Milner's account is Joanna C. Colcord, who was born—and to a great extent grew up—shipboard. The volume ends with "Commodification and Revival," by Paul J. Stamler, an article that examines the work of Loraine Wyman and Carl Sandburg. These two early members of the Folk Revival both collected and performed folk songs, with Wyman performing in a formal concert setting and Sandburg often performing at the end of a lecture or poetry reading. Sandburg's collection, in particular, is of more use to the singer than to the scholar, as he often omitted data surrounding the songs he printed.

What do we learn from all these contributions? We have vignettes of a number of dedicated collectors and some notion of their methods and motives. The careful reader can detect changes in the view of what "folk" is. We see folk festivals bringing performance of traditional music by tradition bearers to a broader audience, especially in the Midwest and Northeast. On a personal level, the book leaves me wishing for a final essay dealing with the second part of the title: the transformation of academic thought and American identity. The clues are in the essays, but a summing up would have been helpful. And, each of the musicians on the cover should really be identified.

But it is the songcatchers themselves—the courageous men and women who stepped outside their physical, cultural, and psychological comfort zones to track down and preserve vital parts of our national heritage—who demand our attention. This is really their book, and we are all in their debt.

**UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage.** Ed. Michael Dylan Foster and Lisa Gilman. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Pp. 188, index.)

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The culture conventions of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have had significant impact on the ways both tangible and intangible cultural heritage are debated, regulated, and managed.

International institutions play an increasing role in shaping how local practitioners relate to “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills” (p. 1) and how both the national and global public view the nomination of heritage elements. It is also clear that funding structures change or adapt when “culture” is elevated to “cultural heritage” by one of UNESCO’s committees. As more states ratify the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and more applications are submitted, UNESCO continuously generates new cases of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which have the potential to transform local heritage practices and realities. In their edited volume *UNESCO on the Ground*, Michael Dylan Foster and Lisa Gilman aim to shed light on how such local constellations are reconfigured when cultural practices are embedded in heritage discourses. Much like Christoph Brumann and David Berliner, in their edited volume *World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives* (Berghahn Books, 2016), Foster and Gilman are primarily interested in the “situation and opinions and agency of the people residing on site” (p. 3) rather than in bureaucratic processes or formal questions of nomination procedures.

Originally published as a special double issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* (2015), the volume seeks to highlight conflicts and continuities between local perspectives on ICH as a starting point for comparative analysis. The volume consists of six case studies following a common structure of five parts, starting with the location, a description of the ICH element, its current status with regard to UNESCO, on-the-ground perspectives, and a concluding discussion. For the comparative project of this edited volume, this structure helps to identify the local specificities of the case studies—such as historical developments, the role of existing heritage institutions, and literacy rates—as well as their common aspects, such as the role of institutions, the importance of tourism, and performers’ views of UNESCO.

Leah Lowthorp’s chapter on Kutiyattam Sanskrit theater reveals the diverse perspectives of local actors on the nomination process and its assumed effects on performers’ social and economic status. Lowthorp argues that the nomina-

tion process brought about a rise in transnational, national, and regional institutions related to ICH as well as an increased mediatization of the practice; further, the accompanying changes in funding structures are shown to have had an effect on the perception of performers as either artists or professionals.

In her chapter on a Korean shamanic ritual inscribed on UNESCO’s ICH list since 2009, Kyoim Yun outlines how economic factors, while marginalized in official heritage discourse, can play a significant role for nominated practices. Following its nomination, practitioners of the ritual nurtured expectations of monetary and symbolic gains amid media attention and touristic advertisements. At the same time, local people assumed that shamans practicing the ritual were no longer affordable due to their increased prominence, leading to decreased incomes for the shamans.

Lisa Gilman’s work on the Malawi healing ritual Vimbuza, on UNESCO’s Representative ICH list since 2008, shows that ICH practices are sometimes chosen for nomination not because they are viewed as representative or even as “cultural,” but for pragmatic reasons. Despite local debates about the illegality or danger of the ritual, it was chosen because it was already well documented, vibrant, and exotic, and thus thought to have a good chance for success. Gilman describes the nomination process as top-down and as lacking real community involvement or local knowledge about UNESCO.

Michael Dylan Foster discusses a Japanese New Year’s Eve ritual, Toshidon, in which masked figures go from house to house disciplining children. The actors he engages echo well-known fears that the UNESCO nomination, while welcomed for its contribution to regional branding, might freeze the tradition and lead to local practitioners losing autonomy over the ritual. As the tradition was already part of a national heritage register, it would have been interesting to learn whether the mostly discursive effects Foster describes, such as a reinterpretation of the ritual as a consequence of the UNESCO nomination, occurred in a similar fashion after the national nomination.

Carol Silverman’s chapter on a Macedonian dance shows how ICH is used by a state-

sponsored agency as part of efforts to strengthen national identity and how in the course of the nomination process, ethnic conflicts and the involvement of minority groups are neglected. Silverman gives a number of possible reasons why the repeated nomination of the dance failed: minority involvement was not mentioned, the language in the application dossier was too populist, and the dance had changed too much from its original form.

Ziying You scrutinizes the dynamics around the safeguarding of a procession and festival in Hongtong County in China. While the tradition is not inscribed on UNESCO's ICH list, she argues that the process of including it on the "second national ICH name list" (p. 119) nonetheless led to the exacerbation of pre-existing conflicts as well as the disempowerment and exploitation of the local population by a "local ICH center" (p. 125). You attributes these ramifications of the "heritage making" process to UNESCO, although she neither explicates the instances of exploitation nor gives further arguments for this assumed causal relationship.

The book closes with three critical discussions outlining common aspects of the six local studies. Anthony Seeger's contribution relates the case studies to his personal experiences with UNESCO as an NGO participant and consultant. Here, the numerous references to UNESCO or its field offices throughout the volume are arranged into an overview of the organization's structure and work processes. This contextualization is vital for an understanding of why and how UNESCO features in the local settings scrutinized in the volume and constitutes a starting point for continued research beyond Seeger's preliminary remarks. Valdimar Tr. Hafstein's discussion highlights how ICH-related processes lead to similar changes in a range of contexts, such as orienting traditions toward display or condensing them in time and content to be more suitable for tourist or media consumption. Dorothy Noyes discusses how comparison serves as a tool not only from an analytical perspective, but also in heritage discourse as UNESCO processes entail the construction of comparable categories (of ritual, dance, or storytelling). It is a strength of the volume that the common features of heritage processes, for example, regarding the role of the

state or differences between "specialist practitioners" and "participatory communal traditions" (p. 166), are teased out by shedding light on local perspectives.

By focusing on local perspectives and giving only scant attention to institutional dynamics, processes, and socioeconomic effects, the volume is limited by design in the reach of its propositions. Both the editors and many of the individual authors make it clear that they are primarily interested in local voices rather than institutional structures or financial, legal, and political effects. As a starting point for subsequent comparative analyses, this in no way constitutes a deficit. However, it becomes problematic when the impact of UNESCO or the causal effects of ICH processes are asserted in the local studies. This is addressed by Yun when she states that she does "not claim that all I witnessed that day was a direct consequence of the UNESCO recognition," but that it was nonetheless "clear that the designation mattered" (p. 47). The influences of UNESCO's work are alluded to in several of the chapters, yet it remains unclear how the delineation of different viewpoints and the interpretations given by local actors are suitable indicators for the effects UNESCO can have on local contexts. Especially in cases where a breadth of pre-UNESCO heritage institutions and processes exist, such an impact assessment appears to be difficult. Here, it would have been helpful to scrutinize local beliefs about the financial and political aspects of UNESCO and ask how these ideas about UNESCO and other international institutions circulate on the local level. How is UNESCO understood to work, and how are the connections to national or regional institutions and actors imagined? Further, which processes and effects are attributed by local actors to UNESCO, and which to local or national power elites?

*UNESCO on the Ground* provides valuable insights into local perspectives on UNESCO and ICH nomination processes that help in understanding the interplay between local contexts and global heritage regimes. It is an intriguing read for scholars in the field of cultural heritage because it discusses debates about cultural heritage from an "on-the-ground" and comparative perspective.